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U.S. Minimizes Israeli Spying

No Extensive Espionage Ring, White House Says

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WASHINGTON—The White House stepped Tuesday into a dispute between the Justice and State departments over an investigation of Israeli spying, endorsing the State Department view that there is "no evidence of any espionage ring involving Israeli officials" beyond the four Israelis linked last week to confessed spy Jonathan Jay Pollard.

However, notwithstanding that official denial, federal investigators are pursuing "several ongoing investigations" of what they believe are Israeli-sponsored espionage activities within the United States, most of which now appear likely to produce criminal charges against either Israelis or Americans, government sources said.

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said Tuesday that the White House agrees "exactly" with State Department comments that denied any U.S. knowledge of espionage by Israeli officials "other than the ones described in the indictment" of Pollard.

Pollard, a former civilian Navy intelligence official, pleaded guilty to espionage-related charges last Wednesday after a federal grand jury indicted him and named four Israeli government officials as unindicted co-conspirators in the case.

The four included two Israeli diplomats, Aviem (Avi) Sella, an Israeli air force general, and Rafael Eitan, a senior Israeli intelligence official said to have masterminded Pollard's espionage operations in the United States.

It was learned Tuesday that Justice Department officials are "looking for ways to relieve themselves of obligations" not to prosecute the Israelis allegedly involved in the Pollard operation.

The "obligations" were entered into last December when a U.S. investigating team interviewed Eitan and other Israelis allegedly involved in the spy ring, one government source said Tuesday night.

He said that the obligations fell short of the immunity from prosecution given to cooperative witnesses in a grand jury inquiry but took on weight because they resulted from an understanding that U.S. officials reached with Israeli authorities.

The State Department issued a statement at a midday briefing by spokesman Bernard Kalb in response to Israeli complaints that the coalition government of Prime Minister Shimon Peres was being unfairly accused in press accounts of concealing from U.S. investigators a wide-ranging espionage network in the United States.

Kalb noted that last week's federal indictment of Pollard on espionage-related charges was accomplished with Israeli "cooperation" and said the United States welcomed Israeli assertions that it knew of no other spying operations in this country.

The State Department denial of further Israeli-sponsored espionage had White House approval. It had been released in part because Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese III had not been formally told of alleged Israeli involvement in the spying probes by department investigators and thus he initially had endorsed the denial, according to a knowledgable government source who refused to be named.

And the White House's own comments in support of the State Department, issued Tuesday by Speakes, were made in part because Meese and other ranking officials lacked information that the statement was in error, one source said.

"The fact is, Ed is 100% wrong. He enlisted the White House behind the statement, but it's flatly wrong," the source said. For his part, Meese has denied through a spokesman having given his approval for the State Department's comments, although sources said they were initially issued with his endorsement.

Although that statement was approved by the White House, one government source told The Times that it did not have the backing of the counterintelligence division of the FBI, which manages espionage investigations in this country.

The FBI refused to endorse the sweeping comments because they all but cleared Israeli agents of further spying, while the United States' own criminal investigation may yet reach the opposite conclusion, said that source, who also refused to be named.

That official and others were clearly nettled Tuesday by what they say is an increasingly pitched battle between State Department and Justice Department officials over handling of the politically touchy Israeli spying issue.

For several weeks, State Department officials have sought to play down the diplomatic impact of the espionage scandal, while Justice Department investigators have pushed for public exposure of the spying and of anyone linked to it.

"What investigating is the State Department doing? I thought the FBI was doing the investigating in this government," one government source said after reading the State Department denial.

But in recent days, one source said, State Department officials won new support for their efforts from Meese.

On Monday, Kalb said that both Meese and Secretary of State George P. Shultz had read and endorsed the State Department's official denial of further Israeli espionage evidence.

Hours later, a Justice Department spokesman said that Meese had not approved the statement. But one reliable government source said Tuesday that Meese in fact worked actively to enlist White House approval for the State Department's comments, which were drafted by State Department legal counsel Abraham Sofaer.

Staff writer Norman Kempster contributed to this story.

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